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Review
Reviewed Work(s): Ce diabolic chant: Ballades, Rondeaux & Virelais of the Late 14th Century by Medieval Ensemble of London and Jacob Senleches
Review by: David Fallows
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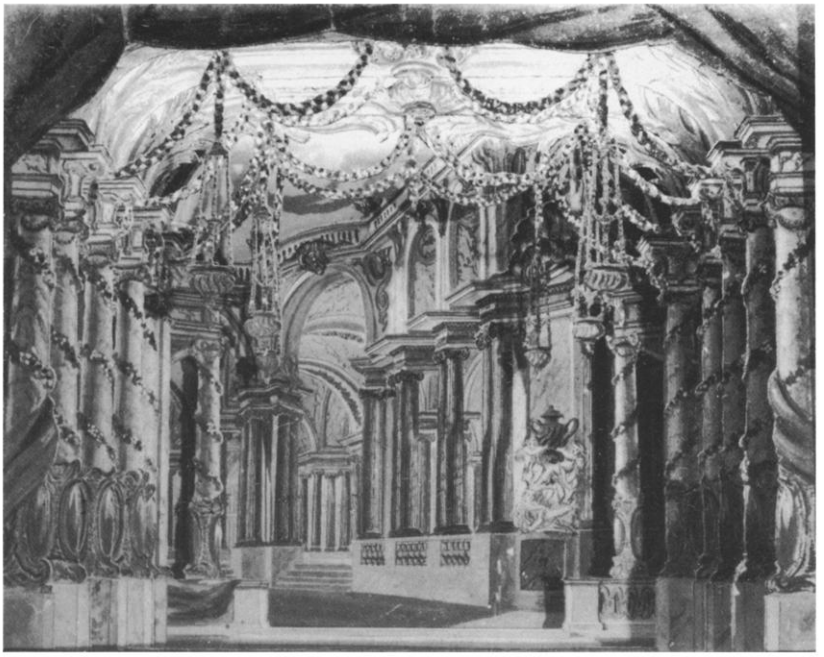
Recordings



Palace garlanded with flowers: set model for an unidentified opera (see Jérôme de La Gorce's article in this issue, pp.438–9)

Ce diabolic chant

BALLADES, RONDEAUX & VIRELAIS OF THE LATE 14TH CENTURY

Jacob Senleches: En attendant esperance; En ce gracieux tamps; Fuions de ci; Je me merveil; La harpe de melodie; Tel me voit. Suzoy: A l'arbre sec; Pictagoras; Prophilias. Galiot: En atendant d'avoir; Le sault perilleux. Guido: Dieux gart; Or voit tout. Olivier: Si con cy gist. Anon.: En Albion; Se j'ay perdu

Medieval Ensemble of London

Decca Florilegium DSDL 704

Under the camouflage of its evocative title (to which I shall return), this record presents yet further evidence of the useful and methodical way in which the Florilegium series is enriching the catalogue. It contains all the surviving secular works of the five composers named, omitting only the single ballade that is ascribed in one source to Galiot but in another (surely correctly) to Philipoctus de Caserta. Presumably somebody therefore has a covert plan to record more of the Ars Subtilior songs in similarly systematic fashion; and I can only say that I look forward eagerly to further records, because this approach by composer is extremely revealing. Particularly welcome is the opportunity of hearing together all the works of Senleches, the most important and influential composer from that first glorious flowering of the tradition.

Music from this repertory has not been much recorded, partly perhaps because its rhythmic complexities demand supple, approximate performances of a kind to make a record producer uneasy. In themselves the rhythms are no more difficult than those in much 20th-century music: nine against eight, 4/4 against 6/8, extreme ranges of note-values and the like should hold no particular terrors for the properly trained musician today. But what makes these rhythms particularly challenging in the music of the Ars Subtilior is the fact that they are associated with musical phrases of enormous length, phrases that to some extent ramble and therefore lose shape entirely unless they are performed with the most extraordinarily controlled grace. Moreover this is in some ways the most extended song style in the history of music: two lines of a rondeau can have music that lasts a full two minutes. Apart from its technical difficulties, then, the style requires tremendous musical concentration, and that is difficult to sustain over several takes in a studio; but beyond that, the performers must cut free of fastidious precision, allow the lines to run, and trust that in due course all three voices will arrive at a major cadential point at the same time. For such music, the studio recording is not a good medium. The performer must always try to find that trickily evanescent compromise between the free, fluid rendering and the one that will stand the scrutiny of repeated careful listening against the score. It is therefore difficult to think of any other repertory in which the ideal recorded performance is so hard to achieve.

In recent years the Medieval Ensemble of London have performed this music as well as anybody; and if only *La harpe de melodie* here comes really close to the ideal performance, that is not to say that I expect soon to hear better versions of any of these works. The performances all show considerable skill, experience and professionalism. Some pieces are performed with instrumental accompaniment, some by voices alone—which shows a judicious choice between well-tried scorings and the more recent preference for ensembles that eliminate instruments entirely. To my surprise, the pieces that work least well are those performed by voices alone; I think, though, that this is not because the medium is wrong but merely that it is wrong to try it in so low a register. In general the pitches chosen here are close to the written pitches on the principle of a′=440. If the muddy textures produced in these low ranges are the best that can be extracted from Michael George and Geoffrey Shaw—who are after all two of the best basses we have for this kind of repertory—then perhaps the lines should be per-

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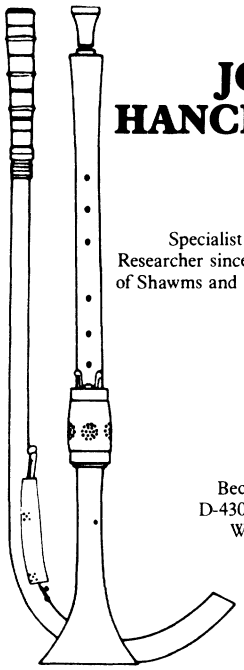

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formed on instruments (which is virtually impossible in that range with the instruments we know from the 14th century), or perhaps the pitch-standard is wrong. My own belief is that the latter is the case, though it is of course perfectly possible that both are.

This is an excellent and exciting record. It has given me hours of pleasure and will give me many more. As so often, there is some wonderful singing from Rogers Covey-Crump and Margaret Philpot. But, given my belief and my hope that this will be just one of a longer series of Ars Subtilior recordings, I would like to voice a few thoughts on how the record might have been better. First, in each of the ballades only a single stanza is sung, though practically all of those on the record survive with a full three stanzas. I don't think it makes much sense to curtail works in this way, and my own feeling (perhaps prompted by a prejudice in favour of full forms) is that the ballades all seem to stop, musically speaking, almost before they have got into their swing. Second, the often slavish following of Apel's editions is perhaps unwise: Apel's achievement is of course epoch-making, but he was extremely cautious about editorial accidentals and emendations, whereas performers should be able to afford to follow their musical instincts slightly more aggressively than they do here.

Finally, and this is particularly sad: the title for the record actually derives from a misreading in the CMM edition of that wonderfully bizarre rondeau *Se j'ay perdu toute ma part*. The words transcribed as 'ce diabolic chant' appear at the end of a line that must rhyme with 'faut', 'vaut' and 'saut'. In early manuscripts the letters 'n' and 'u' are often impossible to distinguish, but in this particular case there is no ambiguity. The writing confirms what the poetic scheme tells us: that the word is 'chaut', and the song about not diabolically difficult songs but diabolically hot weather. But I bitterly regret having noticed this, for the title of the record is beautifully apposite. *Se non e vero . . .*

DAVID FALLOWS

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